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May 8, 2013

The Honorable Barack H. Obama
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

The Honorable Susan E. Rice
Ambassador
United States Mission to the United Nations
799 United Nations Plaza
New York, NY 10017

Dear Mr. President and Ambassador Rice:

I write to express my grave concern regarding the Administration's recent affirmation that President Bashar al-Assad's regime has used chemical weapons in Syria, specifically the nerve agent sarin. As the Administration has clearly stated to the international community, the use of chemical weapons in Syria represents a "red line" for the United States. I share with you your belief that any use of such weapons would very likely have originated with the Assad regime, and am deeply troubled by its "demonstrated willingness to escalate its horrific use of violence against the Syrian people." The use of chemical weapons not only threatens their safety, but the stability of the region as a whole, and cannot be ignored. Therefore, I urge the Administration to formally request that the United Nations (UN) Security Council adopt a resolution to impose a no-fly zone over Syria.

As you well know, the ongoing conflict in Syria has created a regional humanitarian crisis. Since the unrest began in March 2011, it is estimated that more than 70,000 Syrians have been killed. Furthermore, over 1.4 million refugees – three-quarters of whom are women and children – have fled the country to seek safe haven in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt. They have suffered incredible loss, witnessed untold atrocities, and experienced permanent trauma. In addition, the UN reports that as many as 4.25 million Syrians are internally displaced, caught in the middle of the struggle between opposition forces and those loyal to President Assad. At a time when roughly one in three Syrians (6.8 million) is in need of urgent assistance, insufficient funding threatens the ability of the UN to adequately address the needs of refugees, and host nations such as Jordan and Turkey are quickly reaching the limits of their resources.

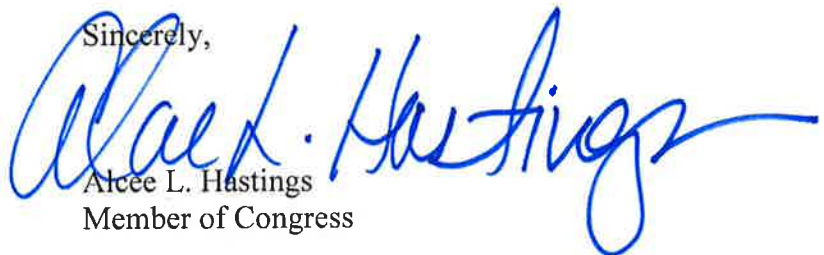
While I commend the United States' recent pledge to double its non-lethal aid for opposition forces in Syria to \$250 million, and its ongoing commitment to provide humanitarian assistance, President Assad remains in power and the use of chemical weapons – whether by the Assad regime or others – signifies a heinous turn of events that warrants a firm response from the international community. The latest U.S. intelligence community assessments of the use of chemical weapons in Syria top the list of brutal tactics adopted by government forces.

In many areas, including Aleppo, Homs, Dara'a, Azaz, and around Damascus, the Assad regime has used its air force, as well as Scud missile strikes and indiscriminate shelling, to decimate entire population centers as part of a systematic effort to crush the rebellion and terrorize its own people. Human rights groups report that fighter jets and helicopters have targeted hospitals, bakeries, and residential buildings, killing more than 4,300 civilians, including women and children.

The Assad regime's air superiority has allowed it to push back rebel advances and hamper their ability to maintain effective control over captured territory. Although George Sabra has been recently named interim leader of the Syrian National Coalition, he and others opposed to the Assad regime have only had limited access to rebel-controlled areas due to the constant aerial bombardment. Imposing a no-fly zone over Syria would help provide opposition forces with the cover necessary to establish governance in strategically important parts of the country and protect civilians. While the United States continues to seek "credible and corroborated facts" regarding the use of chemical weapons, it can take steps to help put an end to the violence and bring about the political transition necessary for a democratic Syria. Enforcing a no-fly zone would send a strong message to the Assad regime and world that the ongoing escalation of violence in Syria is unacceptable.

Mr. President and Ambassador Rice, the time to act is now. For over two years, President Assad has resisted calls to step down and the situation in Syria continues to deteriorate. With each passing day, the violence grows more sectarian, militarized, and radicalized at the cost of innocent Syrian lives. The reported use of chemical weapons in Syria is a sign that the conflict has reached a new, deadlier level, and the international community has a responsibility to respond. It is my sincere hope that the Assad regime will cooperate with UN investigators, and that a peaceful resolution can be found. However, the United States must demonstrate greater leadership in light of the latest developments in Syria. As you carefully consider the options facing our nation and allies, I encourage you to support imposing a no-fly zone. Thank you for your consideration of this urgent matter. I respectfully ask to be kept informed as the Administration evaluates possible courses of action in Syria, and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Alcee L. Hastings". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Alcee L. Hastings
Member of Congress